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VERSES

WILSON JEFFERSON

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WILSON JEFFERSON

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A MEMORY

A rich rare grace green fields o'erspread—
  Bird notes rang clear—the dew
Sun-kissed at morn threw back the charms
  Given to earth by you.
On those first days we braved the maze
  Of life's old things and new.

Earth, air and sky bent to our wills
  And moved in unison
With all the present's store of bliss
  And all yet to be won:
Then the heart's beat and striving feet
  Heeded life's call as one.

The low dull hum of deadening things
  Reached not our fair demesne,
Dwellers of earth we lived apart
  In a fair world serene,
Where cares like swift sea-seeking streams
  Love's fingers slipped between.

SHOULD I DESPAIR?

Should I despair because my lot on earth
Is bound and meted by the chance of birth?
Should I despair because earth's vested power
Demons can wield for one brief soulless hour?
Should I, forsooth, allow the monster, Hate,
In me to rise and stain my soul's estate?—
And grieve if knowledge all its powers use
Distrust to kindle and to nurse abuse?
Know thou, my soul, a vaster kingdom lies
Beyond this rim of meeting earth and skies,
And here and now the guileless heart can feel
The power that shapes a godly people's weal,—
The Presence that, unseen, still shapes the end
Of those who, claiming strength, on God depend,
And, owning weakness, place their hope and trust
In him whose banner ne'er yet trailed the dust.

THE CLOD SPEAKS

In kindred, groveling dust I lie,—
  A part of earth, to earth I cling,—
Yet kin I am to stars on high,
  And man I give meet nourishing.

The rich, the poor, proud king or clown,
  Are for a day my betters all;
Yet the same feet that press me down
  Press onward till beneath my thrall.

Though all things bloom to fade, I boast
  The primal strength I knew of old,—
And new strength gain, as all earth's host,
  Or soon, or late, I shall infold.

As men know death I know it not,—
  Both man and nature I defy,—
Systems and powers will be forgot
  And perished all—ere I shall die!

NIGHT WORKER'S SONG

We seize the tangled skein of things
  When tired hands are folded by,
And night to our unraveling brings
  The glory of the star-set sky.

Day with its garish charms departs
  And dark, gem-studded, rims our world;
And peace all-healing seeks our hearts
  From night's dim, star-strewn spaces hurled.

Moonlight and mist and silence weave
  A calm that soothes the wearied brain;
The round, full earth may sob and heave,
  But we know not its pulse and strain.

We lightly drift from cares along
  Earth's planet-whirling, distant way,
And hear the fabled heavenly song
  From hights where no earth-interests stray.

"DEAD RIVER"

[*A local legend tells of a woman who fruitlessly waited the return of a truant and faithless lover, and finally, bereft of reason, drowned herself in the waters of this river. It was then a part of the main stream of the Savannah, but thereafter the river gradually changed its course and left this sleeping calm.*]

Its waters, quiet, cool and dim,
  E'er keep a strange devotion,—
Even the oaks and poplars slim
  About it show no motion;
Placid its bosom lies and weirdly still
To streams that pierce the plain or leap the
    hill.

Its face by day reflects a sun
  Soft-lying and at rest
Like to an infant lulled upon
  Its mother's tender breast.
By night it wooes the glancing vagrant star
With charms as rare as any maiden's are.

Strangely it keeps a hallowed peace
Amid the world's wild roving,
And from the thrall seeks no release
Of one once madly loving;
Strangely it shows that constancy and love
One heart defiled and one heart died to prove.

THE WORKERS

Toil-seeking, yet with morn's glow in their faces,
By sleep and dreams renewed, they haste along;
Dark roofs that hide from them life's sunlit places
Await them, yet they go, a joyous throng!

But passed the long dull day I see again
Homebound, the weary, shambling haste of those
Who joyous saw morn's golden amber stain
Poured round the sky when daylight first arose.

THE BUILDERS

Through labyrinths of crossing beams
  Bold, crafty figures sunward glide,
And toil serene where virgin gleams
  Of daylight fall their way beside.

Yonder on frail, scant scaffoldings
  A bit of pulsing life looks down,
And higher still a figure swings
  Between the flaring sun and town.

Like a new tribe or species sprung
  To serve the gods of Use and Space,
Some kindly spirit hither flung
  Yon hardy, nimble-footed race,

And solved for each the mystery
  Of all that doth far planets bind,
Wherewith to rear strong walls to be
  A hive for teeming humankind.

DREAMS

I reared a dream-spun fabric to the sky,
Woven of all the glorious thrills of youth;
Like threads of silver, life's bold hopes and high
Ran through fair threads of golden-promised truth.

Then one by one came earth's disasters swift—
Rough winds to shake and mists to hide its gleaming—
Till scattered wide its shattered fragments drift
Earthward, but I to other ports of dreaming.

THE GIFT POSSESSED

To a Caged Bird

Thy home, gay songster, is the free
Far leagues of space's immensity—
  Dim woods and quiet, leafy bowers;
Yet from thy prison small and bare
Thy soul, forgetting bounds, doth fare
  In strains that shame man's cruel powers.

Wings hast thou, and the instinctive sense
That, free, thou couldst pierce the immense
  Far stretches of a luring sky;
And yet, forbidden, thou thy wings
Foldest, while from thy heart upsprings
  Sweet strains thy lot to glorify.

O bird! would that my heart, like thine
Earth-bound, could still feel the divine
  Sweet issues of the gift of life—
And should to me heaven aught deny,
Would that I still might glorify
  The gift possessed—come calm or strife.

JOURNEY'S END

I have felt the lures of earth,
  Sun-flecked road and heaving tide;
But the place that knew my birth
  I would seek now, to abide.

Through life's noon-time splendor, I
  Roamed and felt the world's wild call;
Give me now a glimpse of sky
  Here where peace is over all.

Once earth's bounds to me seemed nearer,
  And my joys sprang from the road;
Now yon hearthside calling clearer,
  Rest would give me and my load.

AFTER DEATH

And for his passage
The soldier's music, and the rites of war
Speak loudly for him.—Hamlet.

"The soldier's music, and the rites of war"—
Aye, for his passing fain we grant him these,
Who reaped in life heart-pang and jeer and scar,
While men, unknowing, reaped his victories.

In life men pitied,—but his faith was bold;
Men counseled, but he strove in his own way;
Men balked him, but the truth his heart did hold
Triumphed, and heaven, somehow, earth's debt will pay.

THE WIFE

I glory when earth's honors come to thee;
I sorrow when thy cherished plans go wrong;
Attuned to thine, my heart beats weak or strong,
And naught thou reapest but what yields to me:
Yet often more than what the world doth see
Of good or ill I bear with joy or tears;
My poor heart quails ofttimes, and yet o'er fears
I shrink from, thou, through me, hold'st mastery.

Deep in my soul thou knowest I little care
For things prized dearly by the throbbing world;
For thy approval all earth's gifts I'd spare,—
Nay, count naught lost if Love his flag unfurled
O'er the strewn wrecks of all our earthly gain,
And left thy heart and mine without a stain.

PIONEERS

Across the prairies wild a cavalcade
Winds its slow way—or hugs the mountain-
side
'Neath frowning cliffs, and where stretch
chasms wide:
Where the deep canon throws its death-like
shade
They penetrate. Naught leaves their hearts
dismayed.
One pulsing hope urges the restless tide
Out where God's mighty stillnesses abide,
And the West smiles!—as yet by man un-
made.

On, on they move, defying death and all
The sombre train of earth's calamities;
The fire that glows within, nor home, nor
ties
Of friends or kin could quench, nor aught
enthrall
The spirit bold that urged them stake life's
best
For all the storied splendor of the West.

THE VINE

This thing I saw about a common vine
That sprang from common soil;
Following the nature of its parent stock
That earth and air and sun
Had wakened, coaxed and urged
To full free life,—
High in the air its tendrils reached,
Like a thing of sense.
But not so seeming good or kind,—
So smiling like, is earth always;
Rains pelted and winds tossed
Its stem about. Heat and cold,
Following too closely,
Dwarfed it. Careless feet
Twice pressed it down.
"Surely," said I, "'twill never reach
A coign of support."

But one brave tendril, all undaunted, won
My sympathy as up it strove
Above its fellows.
It reached to clasp a neighboring bush,—
Through a long day toiled painfully,—
And failed.

Then, not discouraged, on the next
It reached again,
And groped and sighed,
And spent itself,—
Its goal still bafflingly remote.
Then through succeeding days
It likewise toiled,
Sorrowing it seemed that fate its life
Had doomed to unfulfilment.

Days passed and I the vine forgot.
So near to failure did the issue seem,
That I confused and all uncertain,—
For thoughts of failure often bring
Regrets that blur sad issues out,—
Forbade my thoughts thereon to dwell.
And then by chance my eyes one day
The erstwhile trailing tendril caught,
And lo! it had its haven reached,—
Had drooped and sighed, no doubt, and moaned,
But still itself about itself
Had twined;
Had reached and drooped
And twined again,
And still again,
Till its own body gave it strength
And stoutness to reach out and clasp
The neighboring bush.

And there it grew,
Twisted about itself and curled
And all unshapely,—
Its symmetry and grace all lost,—
But earth and the untowardness of things
Spurned, and new glory given
To faith sublime in self!

A SONG OF MAY

My soul, look thou beyond the gloom
  Of sorrows strewn between
The short-lived joys of yesteryear,
To where in rolling grace appear
  Yon billows of soft green,—

And know a thousand thousand hopes
  Rise daily with the sun,—
While life, like earth's unfolding, brings
New gifts of cheer, and glimmerings
  Of joys yet to be won.

TO A BOOK PEDDLER

Meek, cheerful, hopeful, upward looking man!
Thy task is one unlovely, and thy lot
Not to be envied, yet withal thou art
Man's benefactor, counselor and friend.
The world its back turns on thee in disdain
And dubs thee nuisance, trifler, and the like,—
Makes thee the butt of coarse, unfeeling jokes,—
Impatient leaves thee and thy wares, nor heeds
Thy piteous appeals. But these are they
Who need the kindly pitying prayer and tear—
Despairing ones who've never known or felt
The sweet delights of books. Black ignorance
Encircles them. Their faculties are doomed
To move in one worn groove of empty thought.
They see just to their finger tips, nor wish
Further to scan.

Ignore their frowns and jeers;
Pass by their cold refusals and the smile
That leers, and ply thy trade for us who wish
Broad fields of wisdom and of wit to roam—
Who would o'erstep the narrow bounds of time
And circumstance, and fondly contemplate
Thought ages old and wide experience
Flowered into feeling poetry or prose.

FOR LO! HE STOOPED AND SIGHED"

We are poorer since she died—
Sadder, poorer, since she died,
Yet sure I am that Death
Gazed and turned a worshipper:
For lo! he stooped and sighed,
Stooped and eased the pain-drawn breath,
And laid, in tenderest love, his hands on her.

THOUGHT

Weak and unavailing thought is, if it's warmed not by the heart:
Deeds born of it lack the fire that divorces deed from doer;
Words born of it lack the essence that another heart would cherish;
All things born of it are short-lived, empty, vain, and unavailing.

SONNETS OF REMEMBRANCE

I

LINCOLN

Beside thy greatness, O most noble man!
Speech seems a vapor striving with the sun;
And all our far-fetched figures vainly run
A gamut metaphoric, when the plan
Of thy rich wisdom they would wisely scan.
Our similes and tropes in love begun
Strive at high tasks, but ere a victory won
Acknowledge that our love all thought outran.

And yet, to venture, thou art like a tree
That doth in some dank forest side upspring,
Stalwart and bold, a beacon of the glade,
Whose limbs far-spreading tell of liberty—
Giving support to lesser things that cling,
To rivals of its greatness offering shade.

II

GARRISON

A later knowledge man has somehow gained—
A knowledge born, they say, of wisdom rare—
That honors means, not ends, and doth prepare
To cancel griefs and wrongs that long have pained
With sore afflictions, as by heaven ordained—
Not rashly, as they say, but biding time
And circumstance, till man and goodness chime
And all the boons of love flourish unfeigned.

But thou, O Father, knowest of his heart
Who stirred at wrongs, impatient as the wind
Sweeping the level fields of bending grain;
Who evil saw and nobly did his part;
Left friends and foes and dalliers all behind,
And strove to bring to earth thy love again.

III

JOHN BROWN

God fired his soul with purposes of right,
Gave it a dauntless daring glow, and gave
Its owner faith, that armor of the brave
Who heed the heart's appeal against man's might,—
And then with boldness flamed he on the sight
Of men and weaklings, like a star far-flashed
Across the waiting dark, leaving abashed,
In rich effulgence, those of lesser light.

Even now his courage glows across the years
Of servile thought confused and faith grown cold
With no uncertain glimmer; as of old
It stirred the heart through self-forgetting tears—
It still condemns the part that reason plays
O'er hearts unreasoning and degenerate days.

THE SECRET

Life's best for self I'd win, and yet
  I'd spare another pain;
The boons of life I seek, but set
  My soul on righteous gain.

And so I teach my striving heart
  A noble way to live;
I always find life's sweeter part
  Left when the best I give.

MILITANT

I strive with fervor, yet my heart
  Accepts earth's sure decree
Whereby I only gain in part
  The all that I would be;

But 'gainst the dull effects of things
  That bid me less desire—
Life, steel me with the faith that brings
  Thy unrelenting fire.

TO MISS S. D.

Having Attained Her Majority

A child thou wert the embodiment
  Of winsome wiles and graces,
A radiant, flower-like presence sent
  To cheer earth's lonely places,
A breath of morning's sweetness blown
About a world with weeds o'ergrown.

All that those early years foretold
  Time fitly now discloses,
Of the soul's promise of pure gold
  And cheeks to bloom like roses;
For childhood's charm still round thee lingers
Dulled not nor marred by time's rough fingers.

THE SOUL THAT SURPASSES

I grieve not that my hands are bound
  To dull tasks, and my feet must go
Ofttimes the care-encumbered round
  Weak, struggling mortals know;

My heart can spurn the strife and noise
  Of warring things that round me rage,—
For out of love's far deeps come joys
  Earth's sorrows to assuage.

My weak earth-humbled flesh can creep
  Awhile past life's despoiling things,—
And my bold soul can rise and sweep
  Past earth's mean offerings,—

Where all the pangs of grief I've known,
  And all the cares that burdened me,
Shall drift like leaves by wild winds blown
  From the storm-beaten tree.

AMERICA

Fit theme art thou for prophet, poet, seer,—
America, home of earth's far-straying tribes!
Nature has flowered in thee, through men
and things,
And bold high purposes, full many a wish
Long cherished by the nations older grown.
Thy youth with many a garland rich and rare,
Such as become the ripened age, is decked;
And thou a host of glorious memories hast,
Rich with a store of honors nobly won
From noble causes fathered by the sons
Who nurtured at thy bosom; richer still
In inspiration to the advancing lines
Of newer sons, upon whose shoulders rest
The fashioning of the state the fathers
dreamed,
Whose base is brotherhood, whose fabric is
Of love and tolerance and faith compact.
And 'tis with these thy future weal doth lie!
Into their keeping all thy dearest boons
Are fondly given—and unto them thy past
Makes its appeal: Lincoln and Washington,
And Garrison, outspoken for mankind,—
Whittier the gentle, and high-starred John
Brown,—

And many another unknown patriot gave
Thy institutions goodly scope and power—
Relinquished for mankind the narrow ties
That bound them to a selfish gain, and spent
Life to its uttermost for thy advance.

And yet the power that's now thy pride can
be,
If loosed to passion's base appeals, or used
For the mere ends of gain, the potent means
Of thy undoing; while the unfeigned joy
Thou hast in brave, red-blooded, daring men
And projects vast, may blindly lead thee on
Past yonder humble, godly one who strives
Far from the prying gaze of men, unknown,
Unhonored, yet with a bold faith that dares
All things for earth's and mankind's good,
and hopes
For no reward save what his own appeased
Strict conscience grants.

Thy spires tall may point
Ever in pious passiveness to heaven;
Thy marts may teem with men of trade, thy
schools
With seekers after truth—and yet far flown
May be life's higher choice—far driven all
That makes for manhood and the true ideals